

Myles J. (Doc) Colgan, O. Carm., 1922-1998

The Irish usually have a word to epitomize special people. And for the late Myles "Doc" Colgan, the word could only be "shanachie." This is the phonetic spelling of the Irish word for "storyteller." And in Myles' case, the heightened form of "mor" (meaning "great") needs to be added to the title.

He loved hearing and telling stories, used them in his homilies and conversations, and studied and taught their uses and etymologies. Stories were part of his personality and, indeed, his approach to life and spirituality. To paraphrase Will Rogers, another great American storyteller, "Doc" Colgan never met a story he didn't like or for which he could find no use in his life. It was a unique part of his life and vocation as a Carmelite.

Myles was born in Chicago, Illinois on 8 June 1922, the son of the late Thomas Aquinas and Josephine (Gleason) Colgan. The family had originally come from Ireland by way of Canada to the American Midwest. Myles enjoyed telling people about the town of "Colgan" in Ontario where his relatives settled and bestowed their family name on the place.

He grew up in the Chicago of the "Roaring Twenties" of Al Capone and Prohibition. The Colgan family included four sons and a daughter. His brothers Frank (Louise), Aquinas, and Edmond (Catherine) preceded him in death. His sister, Alice, the widow of the late Philip Nash, still lives in Chicago.

A good student, Myles attended St. Barnabas School on the South Side of Chicago. After completing his studies there, he was graduated in 1937 and enrolled at Mount Carmel High School in the Woodlawn section of the city. It was here that his vocation to Carmel was nurtured by the faculty and his own brother, Aquinas Colgan, who was already a Carmelite.

In the Fall of 1941, having graduated from Mount Carmel High School, he entered Mount Carmel College at Niagara Falls, Ontario. As was customary in those days, Myles took extra Latin and other courses to fit into the seminary's study schedule. He also worked in the infirmary at Niagara and this is where, it is believed, he earned the nickname "Doc" which stuck with him for the rest of his days. His older brother Aquinas was also called "Doc."

After his college studies at Niagara, Myles entered the Carmelite Novitiate in New Baltimore, Pennsylvania in August of 1942. Here he was introduced to Carmelite spirituality and community life, and found himself very much at home since he was in essence always a gregarious and spiritual person. He made his simple profession of vows on 15 August 1943 in New Baltimore.

Following completion of his studies at Mount Carmel College, he went to Whitefriars Hall in Washington, D.C. for his theology studies. It was also here, on 29 September 1946, that he made his solemn profession of vows.

It was during his final year at Mount Carmel College that Myles suffered the loss of his brother, Aquinas, who was a military chaplain during World War II with the United States Army. On 6 May 1945, on the Island of Mindanao in the Philippines, Aquinas was killed in action.

At the time Aquinas was trying to rescue a wounded soldier caught in sniper fire. The place is still called "Colgan's Woods." Ironically, John Flaherty, the brother of Myles' novitiate classmate, Robert Flaherty, landed on Mindanao the same day as Aquinas.

There was some talk at the time about Myles' taking his brother's religious name but the decision was made that Myles wanted to remain with his own religious name.

In those years the Carmelites had the privilege of being ordained at the completion of their third year of theology. They completed their final year at the Hall as "simplex" priests who could assist with Masses at parishes, notably in the Northern Valley of New Jersey, but didn't get faculties for hearing confessions until the end of their studies. It was usually a very good introduction to ministry.

At the end of his third year, Myles returned to Chicago with several classmates to be ordained at the former St. Clara Church (known then as the National Shrine of the Little Flower and now as St. Gelasius Church). The date was 5 June 1948, a few days before his 26th birthday, and the ordaining prelate was Auxiliary Bishop Bernard Sheil of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Since his parents were then members of Christ the King parish in Beverly, and he had served the very first Sunday Mass ever offered in the Church, Myles returned there on 6 June to celebrate his own First Mass. Both days in June were more than happy ones for the Colgan Family.

After completing his studies at Whitefriars Hall, Myles was assigned to the faculty of Mount Carmel High School in Chicago. He taught there from 1949-56 when he was assigned as the Provincial Vocation Director for the PCM Province. In this vocation work, Myles' easy-going nature and storytelling ability were great assets. He set up a basement office at St. Cyril Priory of Mount Carmel High School and went to work joyfully to attract young men to the Carmelite Order. He was more than successful in this work, as attested to by the number of vocations and ordinations which were part of the Carmelite experience in those days.

His expertise was often sought by others in the field as exemplified by his serving as president of the Vocation Section of the National Catholic Education Association, and as a founding member of the Midwest Religious Vocation Directors Association, headquartered in Chicago. He also served, during this time, as president of the Chicago Vocation Directors Association of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Another area of Myles' attention was a group entitled the Queen of Carmel Auxiliary for the parents, especially the mothers, of the Carmelite priests, brothers and seminarians in the Chicago area. He often presided at their special Masses and Spring luncheons in the Beverly Country Club. He also helped to found the Carmelite Club for relatives of the Carmelites.

After some ten years of vocation work, Myles taught at DeSales High School for a year until in 1968 he was elected prior of Mount Carmel Priory of Salpointe High School in Tucson, Arizona. He remained at Salpointe as prior, teacher and counselor until 1975 when he was assigned to Mount Carmel Prep Seminary in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

He taught seminarians there for three years until he was named a Religious Education consultant for the Welland County Roman Catholic School Board for over a decade. It was at this time, especially, that both his teaching experience and educational background, particularly his M.A. degree in Religious Education from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, came to the fore. His graduate work at the Catholic University of America (sociology) in Washington, D.C., at Canisius College (education) in Buffalo, New York, at Chicago's Loyola University and DePaul University (education), and at the University of Arizona, was put to exceptional use.

He also taught for two summers at the University of St. Thomas in his chosen field of Religious Education.

When the minor seminary closed at Niagara, Myles shifted his focus to both Religious Education and also to presenting spiritual programs for the newly-established Mount Carmel Spiritual Centre at Niagara Falls.

His interest also included serving as a weekend assistant at Sacred Heart parish in Chippawa, Ontario, where Murray Phelan was pastor. His effectiveness there was attested to by the group of parishioners who journeyed to Aylesford in Darien, Illinois to attend his Requiem Mass. It was also attested to by Murray in a moving and heart-felt homily at this Mass.

Myles was also interested in the people and events of the Diocese of St. Catharines, Ontario, in which Niagara was located, and served as head of the Priests Senate there.

In addition to storytelling and Religious Education, Myles' interest focused on Graphoanalysis. He attained a master's status with the International Graphoanalysis Society in Chicago, and spent years in presenting workshops and using his training to help others. In this he followed the lead and encouragement of the late Norman Wherling, O. Carm. of the PCM Province, who was also an expert in the field.

Myles, then, presented workshops at Niagara, at the Carmelite Spiritual Centre in Darien, and at other locations in the United States and Canada. His presentations covered a wide range of topics in Religious Education, Storytelling, Graphoanalysis, Vocations and others. His devotion to Carmel and the Carmelites could be considered virtually legendary. His knowledge of Carmelitana made him a very effective vocation recruiter, since his love of the Order and its members was reflected in his numerous presentations. His devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel was also exceptional.

On his final trip to Chicago, Myles had a fatal heart attack at Midway Airport and was rushed to Holy Cross Hospital. He died there, at the age of 75, on 15 March 1998. In a fitting way, he was traveling to Aylesford in Darien to attend a meeting of the Communication Commission of the PCM Province.

He was also in Chicago to visit with his family. Myles wanted to go over plans with his sister, Alice Nash, for the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of Ordination in June. He had returned to Chicago in 1973 to celebrate his Silver Jubilee Mass in the chapel of Quigley South Preparatory Seminary on 2 June. For Myles there could be no celebration of any jubilee without his birth family and his Carmelite family.

Myles Colgan was a true Carmelite and priest, family member and friend, storyteller and delightful person to the end of his days. The many Carmelites, family members and friends who attended his wake at the National Shrine of St. Therese and Requiem Mass at nearby Mount Carmel Church in Darien attest to his goodness and greatness. He was loved by many and never failed to reciprocate.

*Kevin Shanley, O. Carm.
St. Simon Stock Priory
Darien, Illinois*

Homily

It's good to be here tonight to remember Myles Colgan and celebrate his life together. A number of years ago, during the renewal after Vatican II, Myles came across an idea from John Shea. "When we are touched by mystery, which is both menacing and promising, we do a distinctively human thing. We gather and tell stories of God to calm our fear and hold up our hope on high." This concept captured Myles' imagination. It became a constant theme in his life, his middle name: Gather the people, tell the story, break the bread. For Doc this was Church, Eucharist and life.

This evening before Mass, I walked through the Church greeting people. You were gathering together and greeting each other. Someone said to me: "You know what everyone is doing? They are telling each other their stories about Myles!" And in that moment we were calming our fears, healing our hurts, lifting up our hope.

As we began the procession to the altar, I couldn't help but smile and think to myself, "Doc, is this a gathering! All the folks are here, Bishop O'Mara and Bishop Fulton are here, and all these priests -- terrific! THIS IS A GATHERING." Can't you see him smiling and feel his joy?

The stories we tell tonight are Myles Colgan stories. He picked these scripture readings for his Golden Jubilee Mass, which we all hoped to celebrate in May. They excited his heart, these stories of God who appears in a burning bush, who stirs dry bones to new life, who prepares a place for us and promises to take us there. Myles would say: "This is our God, folks! We have a great God!" He comes to us, calls out from the burning bush, and invites us to stand on holy ground with him. He tells us his name, and reminds us of his faithfulness. I made the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And to us! This was the God alive in Myles' soul, who always tickled Doc's imagination and delighted him!

So did the vision in Ezekiel. He loved God for stirring those dry bones and clothing them in new flesh, new life. If he were here right now, Doc would be singing: "Your head bone connected to your neck bone, your neck bone connected to your shoulder bone, your shoulder bone connected to your back bone ... Now hear the word of the Lord!"

And Myles would delight in reminding us how Jesus had promised new life in John 14. "Jesus is preparing a place for us. Is that great? And he is going to make sure we get there! He won't let us get lost! Isn't that terrific?" The readings tonight are Myles' gift to all of us. He chose them, not knowing that they would calm our fears, raise our hopes, renew our trust in the Lord, and warm our hearts with memories of him.

Elie Wiesel once said that God created people because he liked good stories. And we become part of each other's stories. We are never really alone because of all the people who are part of our lives. Myles Colgan was a part of all of us. That's why we tell stories tonight, they give us life. We all knew and loved Doc -- some for many, many years. His was a brother, priest, teacher, friend. But to all, he was the same Doc, happy, good, friendly, faithful, enthusiastic and wise.

The infallible sign of God's presence is joy. Doc Colgan was a joyful man. For almost fifty years I watched Myles arrive on a scene and saw everyone smile. My grandmother used an expression: "Sure, here come himself and he's bringing the sidewalk with him." Doc did that always. He never came in, that he didn't bring the sidewalk with him!

The very last time we were together, I heard him come into the office. I was ready for him with a Henry Youngman story from the morning paper. As soon as he walked in I said: "Doc, I was so ugly when I was born, the doctor slapped my mother." We laughed heartily, just as you did. And that's very good, because the laughter of the Father filled the empty tomb. Laughter was a gift Doc gave all of us often. It was a sign of his great heart.

For almost two weeks I have, like you, been waking Doc in my mind and heart. His going was so sudden and unexpected because his coming home to celebrate his jubilee filled us

with happy anticipation. I have pictured him a hundred times walking through Midway Airport in Chicago. Myles was going to report on his work as our Carmelite oral historian. His interviews excited him and filled him with enthusiasm. I know he couldn't wait to tell the Council how well it was going. He felt excited about gathering the story of the Province.

I am sure there was someone else in that airport, too, a man or woman who would go home and tell the family: "I met a terrific man on the plane today, a priest from Niagara Falls." And he or she would tell them about meeting and talking with Myles Colgan.

I can see Doc walking up to the Budget Rent-A-Car counter, smiling. And immediately kidding the clerk: "This a good car? It's not a three-wheeler is it? I need four wheels."

And all of a sudden, there was a transfiguration. Karl Rahner describes the moment of death as a final surrender, a final "yes," one final transforming "Thy will be done." Teilhard de Chardin says: "The function of death is to provide the necessary entrance of God into our innermost selves. It allows the divine fire to descend upon us." Suddenly, Budget Rent-A-Car became a Mount Tabor for Doc Colgan.

And Myles heard Jesus say: "I have come to take you with me as I promised." I like to imagine Moses from the burning bush and Elijah with the fiery sword were there, too, because Jesus, a great storyteller, appreciated Myles' imagination. Doc would have a line: "Lord, if I knew you were coming, I'd have baked a cake."

And: "Aren't you early? I was counting on a full fifty years. The invitations have been printed!"

Doc had more than fifty years, but he got time off for good behavior. The indulgences on all those rosaries he said with Brother John Coghlan really counted! And so Myles said one more "yes" to the Lord, one more "Thy will be done." And Jesus smiled, I imagine, and said to him: "Good! Forget that Chevy you ordered. Here are the keys to a Chariot of Fire."

Myles was proudly a Colgan. His grandparents came from Ireland to Ontario, settling in a town later named Colgan. I used to tell him: "You belonged to a rowdy branch that got kicked out and ended up in Chicago." He grew up in a good family on the South Side, went to St. Barnabas and Mount Carmel. That covers about six chapters of his life, as any South Sider will tell you.

Some of you might not know that Myles had an older brother who became a very good Carmelite priest. His name was Aquinas, nicknamed "Doc," after the angelic doctor. (That's how Myles became "Doc".) Aquinas Colgan was a chaplain in the war. He was killed in action in the Philippines, attempting to rescue a wounded soldier. So Myles had an inspiring model for his priesthood, his own brother who gave his life for another.

Myles loved being a Carmelite and a priest. He enjoyed community and ministry throughout his life. Needless to say, the Carmelites he lived with and the people he served enjoyed him. He made a great contribution to the Order when he served as vocation director. For twelve years his job was to invite men to Carmel. He did it with great success. The coat of arms of the Carmelites has the fiery sword of Elijah and the motto: "I am zealous with zeal for the Lord God of hosts in whose presence I stand." That was the life Doc embraced. For his memorial card he chose Elizabeth Barrett Browning's words: "Earth's crammed with heaven and every common bush is afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes." Carmelites try to walk with God and see like that.

He was a terrific vocation recruiter. "This is a wonderful life that has given the Church great saints," he would say. Look at John of the Cross. He told us: "In the evening of our lives we will be judged on love." That's true. Teresa of Avila taught us: "Do not be discouraged. Do not be upset or worried. All things are passing. God alone suffices." She is so right! Look at St. Therese, the Little Flower, who wrote: "Go to Jesus with confidence and love." Therese also said: "Everything is grace." Doc lived Carmelite insights. He considered being Carmelite as sharing DNA with all our saints.

This showed in his daily ministry, in his excitement, enjoyment, and enthusiasm. Everything is grace -- teaching high school kids, hitting the road to recruit seminarians, Sunday Mass, handwriting analysis, cyberspace.

Tim Unsworth's book, *The Last Priests in America*, is about Doc's generation, men who grew up in the pre-Vatican II Church, built the bridges and crossed over to post-Vatican II. It has been a turbulent time, challenging, sometimes painful. But life giving, too. And Doc Colgan rode the whirlwind of these times. His gifts never grew old, never were out of date, and his commitment strong.

In the years after the Council we all plunged into renewal. Our Provincial was encouraging all the priests to update and suggesting programs of renewal. As Doc would say: "Gotta re-tool, get renewed, get up-dated." He invited a classmate and good friend, Tierney Cahill, to join him for summer programs at St. Thomas in Houston. Tierney's nickname was "Dink." So Doc and Dink headed to school, very warily, but with lots of laughter and good will.

They loved it. Doc came back glowing, saying it was terrific. They had good courses in theology, scripture, and liturgy. But most of all, he loved the people in the programs. Especially the women! Lots of women! "They are smart, they share all their class notes, and they hug you! I love being hugged."

One summer Doc came home and said the big word that year was *paradigm*. If you use that word you are very with it! Even better is the adjective, *paradigmatic*. "I've got to figure how I can get these words in a talk." And he'd laugh. In scripture class he liked *pericope*. He asked Dink, "What's a pericope -- something on a submarine?" Dink

explained it is a PER-IK-APEE" -- a small section of the Gospel read at Mass. He liked the word even more.

Myles, as a homilist, would take the pericope like it was an onion. Let's peel this pericope and see all that is really here. That's the way he preached the Good News. He worked hard, as you Sacred Heart folks know. He wanted to tell the story so the people would love it and take it home. Then sometime, when they were knotted up or their wires were crossed with problems, upsets, or hurts, they would have something to fall back on. Having a bad Wednesday, they could say: "Wait a minute!", and recall that Good News they heard last Sunday.

Myles enjoyed people, such an essential part of being an effective priest. In high school he was close to students, parents, faculty, coaches, staff -- they were all in the family. His wonderful sense of humor made it easy to be with others and invited closeness and friendship. He was fun.

Once at a football game at Mount Carmel, where winning is expected, the team was losing. He was in the middle of the parents. Like some nutty hockey parents you might know (no offense intended) they were upset and screamed insults at the coaches, officials and players. This was bothering Doc. Finally he stood up, faced the parents and glared at them. When they were silent, he shouted: "You people are right! This team is playing like they were a bunch of high school kids!" He sat down, smiling, very happy with himself for quieting the surly mob.

Myles Colgan loved life. That's why it hurts to let him go from our lives. His zest was contagious. In John 10:10 Jesus tells us: "I have come that you may have life, life in the full." Doc was grateful for that. Life in the full was loving and being loved, doing things he enjoyed. It was a Cuban cigar, a kosher hot dog at Sox Park with his sister, Alice, a Bulls' win, a Sabres game, an e-mail letter, a good book, a trip, a run into Chicago. It was the satisfaction he felt being a good priest and ministering to people effectively.

When Clare Booth Luce was taking instruction in the faith with Bishop Sheen, she concluded that "if this is really true, believers should be joyful. So I watched priests carefully, looking for the joy." Doc Colgan passed that test with flying colors.

This was a special gift he gave the Catholic school teachers when he served as a consultant for the Welland County Separate School Board. Those were happy years for him. He admired the teachers, talked about you, remembered you. "These teachers have a tough job. They didn't get the formation and training we priests have had. Yet they are out there every day, in the front lines, getting the job done. I think of them sometimes armed with pea-shooters to fight tanks. We owe them so much help and affirmation." He loved you very much and felt you had enriched his life.

Tonight, remembering Doc and talking about him, begins our healing. We are all going to miss him. He was a lively presence to Carmelites every time we gathered, a shot in the arm, good to be with. We will never see him smile, hear his voice, share his laughter. The absence, the silence hurts.

But we are the people of hope. Even in pain, grief, mourning, we celebrate life. Hope draws us here tonight. We have lighted the Easter Candle, our symbol of the Risen Christ. On the day of John Colgan's baptism that light glowed. That candle was lighted for Noah Dino, the day Myles baptized him here at St. Pat's. I remember telling Doc how much I liked the prayer we say when we give the baptismal candle to the parents: Noah, receive the light of Christ ... may the flame of faith burn in your heart until the day you go out to meet the Lord. I know that Myles prayed it for Noah with gusto.

That prayer, said for little John Colgan at his baptism, has been answered. He had heart-burn all his life. We are so grateful for his faithfulness and for the way his life touched so many others. Now it is with gratitude that we give Myles back to the Lord.

We gather now to give thanks, to ask the Lord's mercy, to be fed with Christ's Body and Blood. Our Eucharist is the great life-giving act that joins us as Church, with our Bishops, brother priests, and all God's people, around this table. We become a living tableau of Doc Colgan's faith. He celebrates with us tonight, with a communion of saints.

If Doc had one more line, it very well might be what Jesus says to us in every Eucharist. Remember me as loving you by loving one another. Please, Lord, help us to walk in your way together.

And Doc, may the roads rise to meet you. May the wind be at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face, and the rains fall soft upon your fields. May God, who loved you first, hold you in the hollow of his hands -- until we meet again.

Happy trails to the Good Doctor!

*Benedict Hogan, O. Carm.
St. Patrick's Priory
Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada*